

City of West Des Moines Delegates Join Governor's Trade Mission to Israel

In September 2017, Governor Kim Reynolds led a trade and investment mission to Israel. The focus of this trip was to expand trade and investment opportunities for Iowa, and was coordinated by the Iowa Economic Development Authority.

The City of West Des Moines sent Jamie Letzring, Deputy City Manager, and Clyde Evans, Director of Community and Economic Development, as its delegates. The City has a formal relationship with the Israeli region of Mateh Asher, so this visit to Israel was also an opportunity for the City to further its relationship with the Mateh Asher region.

The following account includes a daily overview of the visit to Israel.

Day 1 – Clyde's Arrival and First Impressions

After a 10-hour flight from Newark, NY, Clyde made his way to Tel Aviv. He noted that the landscape is similar to Las Vegas, as it is surrounded by mountains and desert.

The drive north to Mateh Asher from Tel Aviv took approximately 1 ½ hours. Since Israel is roughly the physical size of New Jersey, the drive accounted for half the length of the country. As one travels north, population density was much higher than Clyde expected. The metros are densely populated, with plenty of open space in between, similar to Iowa's population landscape.

Days 2 & 3 – Mateh Asher Introduction and Exploration

Clyde met with Itai Davidi, Director of Development and Strategic Advisor to the Mayor, at the kibbutz in Nahariya, one of the major cities in the area. where Clyde was staying. Itai gave Clyde a tour of the major commercial corridor

The next day, Asya Bongard, Deputy Mayor's Assistant for the Mateh Asher Regional Council, accompanied Clyde to the Regional Council's offices. Here discussions took place regarding economic development and the goals of the Sister City relationship.

It is interesting to note that the Mateh Asher Region, although it provides services like a city, functions more like a county in the United States. The Regional Council of Mateh Asher has a board of 32 members who represent all of the communities, settlements, and kibbutzim within the region.

While at the Council offices, Clyde was able to meet with the Mayor Yoram Israeli, who presented an overview of the economic development strategies of Mateh Asher, including a new video the Council prepared highlighting the quality of life amenities in the Region.

Clyde visited several companies that day who had an interest in either establishing partnerships with companies in the U.S., or opening facilities in the U.S.



From left to right: Mayor Yoram Israeli, Mayor of Mateh Asher; Clyde Evans, Director of Community & Economic Development, City of West Des Moines; Itai Davidi, Director of Development and Strategic Advisor to the Mayor, Mateh Asher

Days 2 & 3 – Mateh Asher Introduction and Exploration



Left: Clyde at Rosh Hanrika

Below: Grottos at Rosh Hanrika



Above: Asya and Clyde at Rainbow Cave



Right: Mediterranean Sea

Asya led a visit to a few of the natural sites in the region. The beaches along the coast are beautiful. Tourism is one sector that the region would like to develop, but it is also trying to maintain and balance the agricultural interest it's experienced recently. Banana plantations and avocado groves are considered the cash crop, and avocados are referred to as "green gold."

The day closed with a visit to the Hanita Kibbutz. Hanita is significant in that it sits on the mountain ridgeline on top of the Lebanese border. It was built in 1938 and is one of the oldest kibbutzes in the area.

One thing that stood out to Clyde, not only about the kibbutz's residents but also the people of Mateh Asher, is their optimism. As a nation that is not foreign to conflict, the people of this region remain very cheerful; a concept that would make Americans somewhat uneasy.

Day 4 – Meeting the Prime Minister

On Day 4, Clyde took the train to Jerusalem to meet with Jamie Letzring, Deputy City Manager, and the other delegates of the Governor's Trade Mission who arrived in Israel that day. Clyde noted that the public transit infrastructure was quite impressive because of its affordability and cleanliness. Clyde stated that the people of Israel are friendly and helpful, and since the English language is commonly spoken, it made it easier to get around.

The Governor's delegation was fortunate to have a meeting scheduled with the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu. The delegation was able to spend an hour with the Prime Minister, with the discussion on the topics of trade, shared interests in military collaborations, commonalities between Israel and Iowa, and furthering cooperation in water quality, technology, and agriculture. Following the meeting, Governor Reynolds participated in a Wreath Laying ceremony at the World Holocaust Remembrance Center at Yad Vashem.

Iowa real estate developer, Ron Daniels, who has a home in Israel hosted a reception that evening for the delegation. Ron and his wife were very gracious hosts.



Above: Meeting with
Prime Minister of Israel,
Benjamin Netanyahu

Right: Group at Ron
Daniels' reception



Left: Wreath Laying
Ceremony at Holocaust
Museum



Left: Display at
Holocaust Museum

“הם באו לקחת את הקומוניסטים,
ואני לא התנגדתי - כי לא הייתי קומוניסט.
הם באו לקחת את הסוציאליסטים,
ואני לא התנגדתי - כי לא הייתי סוציאליסט.
הם באו לקחת את היהודים,
ואני לא התנגדתי - כי לא הייתי יהודי.
אחר כך באו לקחת אותי,
ולא נותר איש שיתנגד...”

מרטין נימולר, כומר פרוטסטנטי גרמני

“They came for the Communists,
and I did not object for
I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the Socialists,
and I did not object
for I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Jews,
and I did not object for I was not a Jew.

When they came for me,
there was no one left to object....”

Martin Niemöller, German Pastor

Day 5 – Culture Exploration

A large part of developing a relationship with another country is understanding its values and cultures. Day 5 included a tour of David's City. The group was able to see all of the significant Jewish and Christian sites. Clyde noted that there is an astounding amount of history and cultures buried in Israel.

That evening, the group was able to participate in the Jewish Shabbat Dinner. Shabbat is the holy day, which starts at sundown Friday night and ends on Saturday evening. The delegation shared the dinner with people in the Jewish community, and the group found it interesting to learn about the customs surrounding Shabbat.



Left: Church of the Holy Sepulcher



Right: Group at Western Wall

Right: Wailing Wall



Above: Western Wall



Above: Israeli marketplace



Right: View of Jerusalem

Day 6 – Experiencing the North



Above: Briefing from retired Israeli Army General
Golan Heights

Below: View from Golan
Heights



The Iowa delegation traveled north to the eastern Galilee area of Golan Heights. This triangular area bordered by Israel, Lebanon, and Syria, was captured from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War. Along the way, the group stopped at the historic River Jordan baptism site.

Atop Golan Heights, a retired Israeli Army General gave a briefing on the geopolitical situation in the area. He stated that this region is very hostile with the other side of the border volatile. The group learned the conflict is the result of a proxy war between various Shite and Sunni religious groups, with Iran on one side, and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Gulf States on the other.

Although there are no border crossings between Israel, Lebanon or Syria, many people come to the border seeking medical assistance from the Israelis. The Israelis have set up a field hospital in the area to treat people requiring medical attention; however, the most severe cases will be airlifted to the Galilee Medical Center in Nahariya.

The General pointed out that it's easy to determine where the border is located in the picture to the left. The green land represents Israel; whereas, the brown areas were either Lebanon or Syria. The Israelis have planted about every square yard that they can, and use 80% of reclaimed water to irrigate. There are, however, many areas that lay empty because of the need to clear landmines.

Day 6 – Experiencing the North

Following the General's briefing, the group continued to Mt. Bental, one of the higher points in the area, to survey the surrounding countryside. Clyde noted that the United Nations has an observation post on the mountain. The group then visited the nearby historic sites along the Sea of Galilee.

The final stop of the day was Caesarea, which is located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Leading the tour was a professor who heads up an archeological dig currently underway in Caesarea. Like other parts of Israel, history is a giant layer cake, one civilization built on top of another.



Above: View of Sea of Galilee

Day 6 – Experiencing the North



Above: Group with Dr. Daniel Hillel (third from right)

At dinner, the group ran into Dr. Daniel Hillel, 2012 World Food Prize winner, and his wife.

Dr. Hillel is known for his role in conceiving and implementing a radically new mode of bringing water to crops in arid and dry land regions known as “micro-irrigation.”

Dr. Hillel’s pioneering scientific work in Israel revolutionized food production, first in the Middle East, and then in other regions around the world over the past five decades. His work laid the foundation for maximizing efficient water usage in agriculture, increasing crop yields, and minimizing environmental degradation.

Day 7 – Economic Development Briefing and Pitch Sessions

On this day, the group had numerous briefings from different experts from the National Economic Council on the state of economic development in Israel. Following the presentations, there was a tour of the Israel Museum, which is home to the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Later in the day, the Iowa delegation was part of a pitch session from six Israeli start-ups involved in the biotechnology sector. The work these companies are doing was fascinating, such as the company that uses nanoparticles to detect and remove cancerous tumors. These nanoparticles attach themselves to the cancer and the process then is to use a form of microwaves to activate the nanoparticles and dissolve the tumor. There is remarkable innovation happening in Israel.



Above: Companies represented at pitch session.



Right: National Economic Council Briefing

Day 8 – 9/11 Memorial and Innovation Meetings



Above: Gov. Reynolds speaking at 9/11 ceremony



Above: Group at Teva Pharmaceuticals

Day 8 of the trip included a visit to Teva Pharmaceuticals, one of the world's leading makers of generic medicines. Israel has proven to be a place of ingenuity and innovation, particularly in the biotech and health sciences industries.

From there, the next visit was to the 9/11 Memorial. The memorial is the only 9/11 memorial outside of the United States. Speeches were given by the head of the opposition party in Israel, the United States Ambassador, Governor Reynolds, and several others followed by a wreath-laying ceremony.

Day 8 – 9/11 Memorial and Innovation Meetings

From the ceremony, the group traveled to Tel Aviv to meet with representatives from the Israeli Innovation Authority. The Authority is a government agency responsible for the operation and oversight of Israel's incubators and accelerator programs. The Authority receives approximately \$500 million annually to run the programs. Because of this substantial investment in innovation, Israel is known as "Start-Up Nation."

After checking into the hotel, the group had a briefing from the various staff members from the United States Embassy.

Following the presentations, the group met with representatives from the BIRD Foundation, which is a jointly funded agency by the US and Israeli governments to promote collaborations between Israeli and US companies.



Above: US Embassy Briefing

Day 9 – Growing Iowa's Global Partnership Seminar and Ambassador's Reception



Above: Growing Iowa's Global Partnerships seminar

The day started off with the State of Iowa's Global Partnership Seminar. The event was hosted at the offices of one of Israel's largest law firms. The event attracted almost 150 attendees that wanted to learn more about how their company could do business in Iowa. It was one of the largest attended events that the State has ever hosted on a trade mission. The Governor and Debi Durham, the Director of the Iowa Economic Development Authority, gave fantastic presentations.

Ms. Letzring traveled to Nahariya to meet with representatives from the Galilee Medical Center to explore partnership opportunities with medical facilities in West Des Moines and the Metro area.

Day 9 – Growing Iowa's Global Partnership Seminar and Ambassador's Reception

Some members of the group departed to the Watec Conference, where Governor Reynolds was welcomed as a speaker. Watec is an international conference focused on water technology.

The last official event on the itinerary before departure was a reception at the United States Ambassador's residence. At the event, representatives from Iowa State University and the University of Iowa signed separate Memorandums of Understanding for collaborative agreements with Israeli universities.

Clyde was able to meet one last time with the representatives from Mateh Asher and with the representative from a company that has an interest in having operations in the United States. The concluding reception was a great bookend to this Trade Mission.



Above: MOU signing between Iowa State University and University of Iowa and Israeli universities

Left: Gov. Reynolds speaking at Watec Conference



Right: Group at Ambassador's Reception

Day 10 – Departure

The departure from Israel and transition to customs and border control was a smooth process. The return trip from Israel to the United States was long, as expected, and since members of the Trade Mission had been awake for approximately 25 hours, it was now time for rest and recovery.

Final Thoughts

- Israel is a remarkable place, full of culture, history, and innovation.
- The Israelis are a very industrious, self-reliant, and innovative people. There is also a severe loyalty to those considered friends.
- In the face of adversity and hostility, Israelis remain optimistic.
- The investment in and support of innovation from government agencies are driving the development of ingenuity.
- There are great opportunities to be acted upon regarding business attraction and growth with Israeli companies.

For more information on City of West Des Moines international strategies, visit www.wdm.iowa.gov/government/international.

Photos courtesy of Iowa Economic Development Authority, Jamie Letzring, and Asya Bongard.